

TESTIMONY to co-Chairs Senator Eric Coleman, Representative Gerald Fox and members of the Judiciary Committee, Monday, April 4, 2011.

My name is Sidney F. Van Zandt of 3 Front St., Groton, CT.

I would urge you to support **H.B. # 6557** that will protect municipalities that 1) offer free access to their recreational lands, and 2) take reasonable precautions to ensure that recreational areas are safe.

A successful lawsuit against the MDC resulting from a biking accident in 2010 has aroused fears that municipalities may need to restrict or end public access to open space parcels that they hold.

My concern is that existing open space, if it is no longer available for recreation because of liability issues may get placed on the auction block to the highest bidder. In addition, any future hope of promoting protection of open space through purchase by municipalities would be threatened. Open space is not only a vital recreational asset and a refuge for wildlife, it protects our underground water supplies and retards harmful runoff into our waterways. Once it is claimed by development, it is gone forever.

Besides the MDC there are 169 towns in this state. You represent some of them. If you take a moment to visualize each parcel that is owned by your town that includes woodlands and fields with trails, to baseball fields, to kiddy parks you will realize how valuable these parcels are to the greenbelt, wildlife corridors, places of recreation that makes your town and all the others a special place to live. That also includes the village green which is the center of the place you call home.

I was a founder of the Groton Open Space Association, (GOSA) in 1967 which spearheaded the fund drive with the help of the Ct. Forest and Park Assoc. to raise the funds for the Town's portion of an open space grant that in 1970 Saved the Haley Farm, now a state park. GOSA was also involved in helping to save Bluff Point from massive development pressures, now Bluff Point State Park and Coastal Reserve. Bluff Point and Haley Farm have been joined by a pedestrian and bike bridge over the Amtrak rail line, and they total over 1,000 acres. Our organization has recently purchased -- with the help of DEP & LIS funds and local supporters -- two parcels in Groton of 76 acres (May 2008) and 63 acres (December 2010) for open space. We have been promoting protection of green belts since 1967 for wildlife habitat as well as supporting crosstown hiking trails, most notably the Bluff Point to Preston Bike/Hike Trail.

In our town GOSA, the Avalonia Land Conservancy, the State and Town Open Space lands have helped to provide a corridor from the Mystic River to the Thames River. Unfortunately key parcels along this corridor belong to the town, and they could conceivably become unavailable for liability reasons.

If you extrapolate this example to every one of the 169 towns in Connecticut, the loss of liability protection has a huge potential effect. Liability protection is provided to municipalities in the abutting states of Massachusetts and Rhode Island. I urge you to restore recreational liability protection for Connecticut municipalities by giving your support to: **H.B. 6557**

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